

2021 Third Quarter Montana State Parks Visitation Report As of October 24, 2021

Key Takeaways

- There were an estimated **2,968,617** state park visitors thru the third quarter of 2021. When compared with last year, this represents a slight decrease of **2.0%**, or a decline of an estimated **61,238** visitors. However, when compared with 2019, this represents an increase of **27.1%**, or an estimated **632,926** more visitors.
- 2020 was a record setting one for the Montana State Park system in spite of some initial temporary closures promulgated by the COVID-19 health pandemic. Until July of 2021, visitation increased for parks as travel and tourism across the state grew and the public continued to turn to the outdoors. However, fires, smoke, and inclement weather conditions slowed visitation in recent months.
- In September, there were an estimated 337,637 state park visitors. When compared with last year, this represents a slight decrease of 1.4%, yet a significant jump of 35.7% compared with 2019. A summary of month-by-month visitation estimates for the state park system between 2019 and 2021 can be found below.

2021 2020 2019					2,335,	3	,968,617 ,029,855
0	500,0	00 1,000,0	00 1,500,0	00 2,000,0	00 2,500,00	0 3,000,0	00 3,500,000
Year	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	Apr.	May	Jun.	Sub-Totals
2019	72,608	53,884	94,648	146,589	284,340	437,261	1,089,330
2020	92,121	83,506	151,979	224,062	396,508	465,567	1,413,743
2021	125,018	92,194	176,503	236,463	385,264	556,058	1,571,500
	Jul.	Aug.	Sep.				
2019	545,156	452,339	248,866				1,246,361
2020	691,549	582,160	342,403				1,616,112
2021	628,408	431,072	337,637				1,397,117

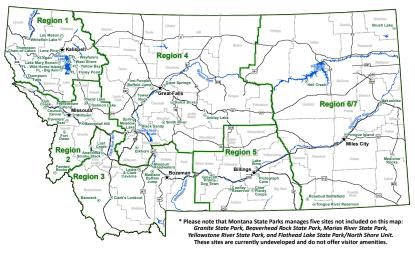
• For 2021, nine parks have already welcomed over 100,000 visitors. Two of these have served over 200,000 and two other parks have hosted more than 300,000 visitors. Estimates for all state parks can be found in the forthcoming contents of this report.

* Please see report notes at the end of this document to learn about the state park system's methodological practice and a summation of recent updates to the estimation approach.

Introduction

The forthcoming summary has been developed utilizing reported numbers by park managers. The system's visitation methodology and reporting practices did not substantially change during this time. However, it is noteworthy to mention that in 2019, staff members began undertaking a significant look at ways to improve accuracy. This has included installing new vehicle and trail counters at park entrances where there were none; and, replacing devices that were beyond their useful life.

The Montana State Parks system is sub-divided into six administrative regions with regional headquarter offices located in Kalispell (1), Missoula (2), Bozeman (3), Great Falls (4), Billings (5), and Miles City (6/7).



The below graph depicts how visitation thru the third quarter of this year has trended for each of the regions since 2019. Collectively, Regions 1 and 4 represented nearly half of total visitation for the state.

1,000,000							
800,000						Region 1	
	7,812				755,278	Region 2	1
600.000	2,830				723,735	Region 3	4
	9,797				480,564	Region 4	ļ
29	2,726				437,640 298,355	Region 5	
	2,736				273,045		
0 19	9,790				-,	Regions	6 and 7
	2019		2020		2021		
Region	2019	% of	2020	% of	2021	% of	1
		total		total		total	
Region 1	697,812	29.9%	910,524	30.1%	755,278	25.4%	
Region 2	292,726	12.5%	421,793	13.9%	437,640	14.7%	
Region 3	212,736	9.1%	180,475	6.0%	298,355	10.1%	
Region 4	542,830	23.2%	652,239	21.5%	723,735	24.4%	
Region 5	389,797	16.7%	597,755	19.7%	480,564	16.2%	
Regions 6/7	199,790	8.6%	267,069	8.8%	273,045	9.2%	
TOTAL	2,335,691		3,029,855		2,968,617		

When comparing year-to-date estimates for 2021 with the last two years, there are some interesting trends:

- Compared with 2020, growth was most significant in Region 3, headquartered in Bozeman. This could be attributable to last year's temporary closure at one park Bannack in addition to the suspension of cave tours at Lewis & Clark Caverns. Contrastingly, growth slowed the most in Region 1. A possible factor for this is that there was less displacement of visitors from nearby Glacier National Park this year.
- Compared with 2019, there was double-digit growth in all regions except for in Region 1, headquartered in Kalispell. Notably, Region 2 experienced nearly a **50%** increase in the estimated number of visitors it has welcomed in just two years. Region 3 is not far behind.
- Growth throughout the state, with new residents moving to Montana, is occurring at a record pace. Recent surveys suggest that many of these new individuals are choosing to move to Montana for its outdoor recreational access and opportunity. This has important implications for the state park system and underscores the need for engaging in important management and operational planning efforts as well as assessing funding and staffing resources.

Region	Comparison with 2020		Comparison w	with 2019
	# Visits	% Change	# Visits	% Change
Region 1	-155,246	-17.1%	+57,466	8.2%
Region 2	+15,847	3.8%	+144,914	49.5%
Region 3	+117,880	65.3%	+85,619	40.2%
Region 4	+71,496	11.0%	+180,905	33.3%
Region 5	-117,191	-19.6%	+90,767	23.3%
Regions 6/7	+5,976	2.2%	+73,255	36.7%
TOTAL	-61,238 est. visits		+632,926 est. visits	

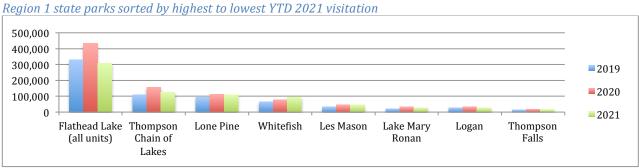
A region-by-region glimpse

A closer look at visitation for each state park within the administrative regions reveals further insights into what is occurring. What follows is a detailed look at visitation data.

Region 1 saw an estimated **755,278** visitors across its eight parks reporting visitation figures thru the third quarter of the year. This represents a **17.1%** decrease in visitation (or **155,246** less visitors) compared with last year, and **25.4%** of the state's total visitation. Compared with 2019 levels, this represents an estimated **57,466** more visitors, or an **8.2%** increase.

Flathead Lake was the second most visited park in the state thru the third quarter of the year; Thompson Chain of Lakes was eighth; and Lone Pine was ninth. Not far behind was Whitefish Lake at eleventh and the sole park in the region that has experienced steady growth in 2021. Offering access to water recreation and camping opportunities, a significant driver of the region's visitation is Flathead Lake. Thru the end of September, the park's growth slowed sharply compared with last year. However, it stands to note that one factor that heavily influenced the park's visitation last year were closures at nearby Glacier National Park. This pushed many visitors to the state park campgrounds and other public lands causing spikes in visitor numbers.

It also should be noted that new trail counting devices were installed at the Flathead Lake units of Wayfarers and West Shore, however offsetting this potential growth were temporary closures related to a fire that impacted the Finley Point and Yellow Bay units in August. New trail devices were also installed at Lone Pine this year.



Estimated 2021 year-to-date visitation (January-September)

State Park	Q3 YTD 2019	Q3 YTD 2020	Q3 YTD 2021	2020 vs. 2021	2020-21 % change
Flathead Lake (all units)	329,012	433,494	307,815	-125,679	-29.0%
Thomp. Chain of Lakes	109,127	155,483	125,545	-29,938	-19.3%
Lone Pine	95,003	111,672	108,246	-3,426	-3.1%
Whitefish	66,663	79,074	94,949	15,875	20.1%
Les Mason	33,294	46,195	45,785	-410	-0.9%
Lake Mary Ronan	21,614	32,091	28,424	-3,667	-11.4%
Logan	28,018	33,455	28,189	-5,266	-15.7%
Thompson Falls	15,081	19,060	16,325	-2,735	-14.3%
	697,812	910,524	755,278	-155,246	-17.1%

NOTE: Includes Flathead Lake being counted as one park, comprised of six units. Currently, visitation data is not regularly collected at the N. Shore unit of Flathead Lake. Also of note is that the gates at the vehicular entrances of Les Mason and Thompson Falls are seasonally closed during earlier parts of the year - estimates solely reflect walk-in visitors. In August, there was a fire that closed the Finley Point area temporarily.

Region 1 - Flathead Lake Unit estimates (January-September) Sorted by highest to lowest YTD 2021 visitation

	Q3 YTD	Q3 YTD	Q3 YTD	2020 vs.	2020-21
Flathead Lake Unit	2019	2020	2021	2021	% change
FL-Wayfarers	179,774	237,756	134,079	-103,677	-43.6%
FL-Big Arm	47,471	63,804	58,847	-4,957	-7.8%
FL-West Shore	26,074	34,418	39,512	5,094	14.8%
FL-Yellow Bay	23,556	30,462	29,516	-946	-3.1%
FL-Finley Point	28,244	45,472	29,107	-16,365	-36.0%
FL-Wild Horse Island	23,893	21,582	16,754	-4,828	-22.4%
	329,012	433,494	307,815	-125,679	-29.0%

NOTE: The entrance gate is seasonally closed during much of the winter at the Finley Point unit of Flathead Lake.

Region 2 saw an estimated **437,640** visitors across its nine parks reporting visitation figures thru the third quarter of the year. This represents an estimated **3.8%** increase in visitation (or **15,847** more visitors) compared with last year, and **14.7%** of the state's total visitation. Compared with 2019 levels, this represents an estimated **144,914** more visitors, or a notable **49.5%** increase.

Nearly all parks in Region 2 experienced an increase in visitation thru the third quarter of the year. Milltown was the tenth most visited park in the state during this time period, while Salmon Lake and others were not that far behind. The spike in visitation at Milltown may have some correlation with the addition of counting devices installed at two entrances that heretofore had not been included in the region's visitation data. There were also counters added to the Salmon and Placid Lake Day Use areas, as well as on two trail locations at Travelers' Rest earlier in the year. The overall regional increase in visitation for 2021 is particularly notable, nonetheless, considering there are three parks that are seasonally closed in the winter - Beavertail Hill, Salmon Lake, and Placid Lake - and that there has been a temporary construction closure at Fort Owen all year.

120,000 100,000 80,000 60,000 40,000					 2019 2020 2021
20,000 0 Milltown Salmon Lake	Travelers' Frenchto Rest Pond	own Placid Lake Bea		ainted Fort Owen F Rocks	
	Q3 YTD	Q3 YTD	Q3 YTD	2020 vs.	2020-21 %
State Park	2019	2020	2021	2021	change
Milltown	32,020	65,773	95,820	30,047	45.7%
Salmon Lake	48,966	69,980	80,828	10,848	15.5%
Travelers' Rest	33,377	38,481	54,308	15,827	41.1%
Frenchtown Pond	46,076	76,151	52,684	-23,467	-30.8%
Placid Lake	62,447	84,922	52,079	-32,843	-38.7%
Beavertail Hill	21,095	27,990	39,319	11,329	40.5%
Council Grove	29,176	37,826	34,867	-2,959	-7.8%
Painted Rocks	11,565	16,360	23,573	7,213	44.1%
Fort Owen	3,834	4,310	4,162	-148	-3.4%
Fish Creek	4,170	0	0	0	N/A
	292,726	421,793	437,640	15,847	3.8%

Estimated 2021 year-to-date visitation (January-September) *Region 2 state parks sorted by highest to lowest YTD 2021 visitation*

NOTE: Visitation data at Fish Creek was not regularly reported in 2020 or 2021. Fort Owen was temporarily closed for construction; and, it should be noted that there are typically seasonal closures at Beavertail Hill, Salmon Lake, and Placid Lake.

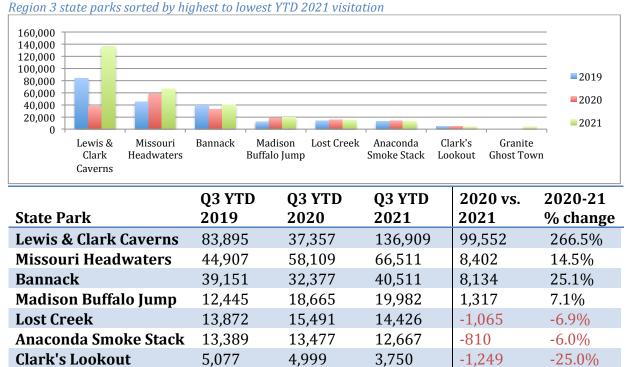
Granite Ghost Town

Beaverhead Rock

Region 3 saw an estimated **298,355** visitors across its eight parks reporting visitation figures thru the third quarter of the year. This represents an estimated a significant **65.3%** increase in visitation (or **117,880** more visitors) compared with last year, and **10.1%** of the state's total visitation. Compared with 2019 levels, this represents an estimated **85,619** more visitors, or a **40.2%** increase.

A significant driver of growth for the region was Lewis & Clark Caverns, which was the sixth most visited park in the state thru the third quarter of this year. It stands to note that the jump in growth is largely attributable to the cave tour closures last year in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, in looking at the park's 2019 estimate, 2021 represents more than a mere rebound. Nearby, Missouri Headwaters and Madison Buffalo Jump also have experienced growth, which could also be driven by population expansion of the Gallatin County region as well as the parks' proximity to the I-90 interstate, constituting an easy-stop over for travelers.

It should further be noted that a new counting device at Granite Ghost Town was installed in June this year. Staff members at Lost Creek, Missouri Headwaters, and Beaverhead Rock are also adding, or in some cases replacing, counters.



Estimated 2021 year-to-date visitation (January-September)

0

0

212,736

NOTE: Currently, visitation data is not regularly collected at Beaverhead Rock but will be soon. It was collected for the first time at Granite Ghost Town in June of 2021. Also of note is that Clark's Lookout is seasonally closed during the winter months.

180,475

0

0

3,599

298,355

0

3,599

117,880

0

N/A

N/A

65.3%

Region 4 saw an estimated **723,735** visitors across its eight parks reporting visitation figures thru the third quarter of the year. This represents an estimated **11.0%** increase in visitation (or **71,496** more visitors) compared with last year, and **24.4%** of the state's total visitation. Compared with 2019 levels, this represents an estimated **180,905** more visitors, or a **33.3%** increase.

Giant Springs was again the state's most visited park to date, while Spring Meadow Lake was fourth. The two parks' locations within Great Falls and Helena, respectively, attract numerous local residents seeking to get outdoors. It stands to note that some of Spring Meadow Lake's growth can potentially be attributed to the addition of counting devices installed at three trail entrances that heretofore had not been included in the region's visitation data. This also holds true for First People's Buffalo Jump, where three new counting devices were added in 2021. This notwithstanding, the return of public programs and school field trips also helped to contribute to growth at First People's this year.

400,000 350,000 300,000 2019 250,000 200,000 2020 150,000 100,000 2021 50,000 0 Giant Springs Spring Meadow Black Sandy Ackley Lake Sluice Boxes Tower Rock First Peoples Smith River Buffalo Jump **Q3 YTD** 2020 vs. 2020-21 Q3 YTD Q3 YTD **State Park** 2019 2020 2021 2021 % change **Giant Springs** 313,246 312,655 342,466 29,811 9.5% **Spring Meadow** 109,152 146,350 216,998 70,648 48.3% 62,352 **Black Sandy** 39,125 56,153 -6,199 -9.9% Ackley Lake 30,433 58,947 40,942 -18.005 -30.5% **Sluice Boxes** 19,792 28,538 23,891 -4,647 -16.3% 21,734 **Tower Rock** 10,008 23.862 -2.128-8.9% First Peoples Buffalo Jump 15,023 13,287 17,401 4,114 31.0% 4,150 **Smith River** 6,248 6,051 -2,098 -33.6% **Elkhorn Ghost Town** 0 0 0 0 N/A **Marias River** 0 0 0 N/A 0

Estimated 2021 year-to-date visitation (January-September) *Region 4 state parks sorted by highest to lowest YTD 2021 visitation*

NOTE: Currently, visitation data is not regularly collected at Elkhorn or Marias River. Also of note is that the Smith River was seasonally closed for earlier parts of the year and again due to low water conditions beginning in June.

652,239

542.830

11.0%

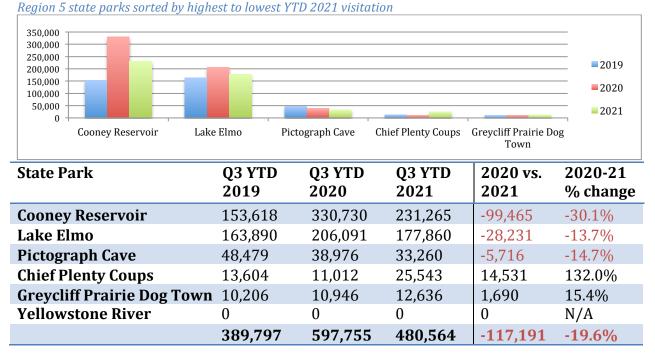
71.496

723,735

Region 5 saw an estimated **480,564** visitors across its five parks reporting visitation figures thru the third quarter of the year. This represents an estimated **19.6%** decrease in visitation (or **117,191** less visitors) compared with last year, and **16.2%** of the state's total visitation. Although visitation estimates were higher last year than in 2021, compared with 2019 levels, there were an estimated **90,767** more visitors, representing a **23.3%** increase.

Cooney Reservoir was the state's third most visited park thru the third quarter of this year, while Lake Elmo came in fifth. A key driver for the region's visitation is Cooney, where recently fire restrictions, smoke, and low lake levels all contributed to slowing growth compared with last year. This fall, Lake Elmo will be drained to address the presence of invasive Asian clams that were identified last year, and so park visitation will inevitably be impacted.

It should also be noted that Pictograph Cave was closed for about four months in 2021 due to a rock fall. In contrast, visitation at Chief Plenty Coups has grown substantially this year compared with last year. The health pandemic had a significant impact on the Crow Reservation last year, where the park is located. This year has brought back the return of many group activities again.



Estimated 2021 year-to-date visitation (January-September)

NOTE: Currently, visitation data is not regularly collected at Yellowstone River. Also of note is that Greycliff Prairie Dog Town is seasonally closed during winter months.

Regions 6 and 7

Regions 6 and 7 saw an estimated **273,045** visitors across its seven parks reporting visitation figures thru the third quarter of the year. This represents a slight **2.2%** increase in visitation (or **5,976** more visitors) compared with last year, and **9.2%** of the state's total visitation. Compared with 2019 levels, this represents an estimated **73,255** more visitors, or a **36.7%** increase.

Makoshika was the seventh most visited park in the state in 2021 and is a significant driver of overall visitation estimates for the eastern regions. If offers several public programs and events, and camping opportunities. It is also located near Montana's border with North Dakota and close to the freeway making it a convenient stop for I-90 travelers. Tongue River Reservoir, located near Montana's border with Wyoming, is another important contributor to the region's visitation and was the twelfth most visited park thru the end of the third quarter. It offers important access to water recreation and camping.

It should be noted that new counters were added at both parks earlier this year, which could have contributed to some of the growth. Region staff members are looking to also replace counters at other parks where existing devices are nearing the end of their useful life.



Estimated 2021 year-to-date visitation (January-September) *Region 6 and 7 state parks sorted by highest to lowest YTD 2021 visitation f*

NOTE: Brush Lake is seasonally closed in the winter months.

2019-2021 Year to Date Visitation (January - September) Parks sorted by highest to lowest YTD 2021 visitation

REGION	STATE PARK	Q3 YTD 2019	Q3 YTD 2020	Q3 YTD 2021
4	Giant Springs	313,246	312,655	342,466
1	Flathead Lake (all units)	329,012	433,494	307,815
5	Cooney Reservoir	153,618	330,730	231,265
4	Spring Meadow	109,152	146,350	216,998
5	Lake Elmo	163,890	206,091	177,860
3	Lewis & Clark Caverns	83,895	37,357	136,909
6/7	Makoshika	72,969	106,063	128,156
1	Thompson Chain of Lakes	109,127	155,483	125,545
1	Lone Pine	95,003	111,672	108,246
2	Milltown	32,020	65,773	95,820
1	Whitefish	66,663	79,074	94,949
6/7	Tongue River Reservoir	63,324	85,421	87,782
2	Salmon Lake	48,966	69,980	80,828
3	Missouri Headwaters	44,907	58,109	66,511
4	Black Sandy	39,125	62,352	56,153
2	Travelers' Rest	33,377	38,481	54,308
2	Frenchtown Pond	46,076	76,151	52,684
2	Placid Lake	62,447	84,922	52,079
1	Les Mason	33,294	46,195	45,785
4	Ackley Lake	30,433	58,947	40,942
3	Bannack	39,151	32,377	40,511
2	Beavertail Hill	21,095	27,990	39,319
2	Council Grove	29,176	37,826	34,867
5	Pictograph Cave	48,479	38,976	33,260
1	Lake Mary Ronan	21,614	32,091	28,424
1	Logan	28,018	33,455	28,189
5	Chief Plenty Coups	13,604	11,012	25,543
4	Sluice Boxes	19,792	28,538	23,891
2	Painted Rocks	11,565	16,360	23,573
4	Tower Rock	10,008	23,862	21,734
3	Madison Buffalo Jump	12,445	18,665	19,982
6/7	Medicine Rocks	14,574	24,619	18,018
4	First Peoples Buffalo Jump	15,023	13,287	17,401
6/7	Hell Creek	31,823	31,069	17,368
1	Thompson Falls	15,081	19,060	16,325
3	Lost Creek	13,872	15,491	14,426
3	Anaconda Smoke Stack	13,389	13,477	12,667
5	Greycliff Prairie Dog Town	10,206	10,946	12,636
6/7	Brush Lake	8,151	10,450	11,189
6/7	Pirogue Island	3,159	5,150	5,924

6/7	Rosebud Battlefield	5,790	4,297	4,608
2	Fort Owen	3,834	4,310	4,162
4	Smith River	6,051	6,248	4,150
3	Clark's Lookout	5,077	4,999	3,750
3	Granite Ghost Town	0	0	3,599
2	Fish Creek	4,170	0	0
5	Yellowstone River	0	0	0
		2,335,691	3,029,855	2,968,617

Seasonal Closures During Winter Months

REGION	STATE PARK	COMMENTS
1	FL - Finley Point unit	Gates closed; walk in estimates only
1	Les Mason	Gates closed; walk in estimates only
1	Thompson Falls	Gates closed; walk in estimates only
2	Beavertail Hill	Seasonal closure
2	Placid Lake	Seasonal closure
2	Salmon Lake	Seasonal closure
3	Clark's Lookout	Seasonal closure
4	Smith River	Seasonal closure
5	Greycliff Prairie Dog Town	Seasonal closure
6/7	Brush Lake	Seasonal closure

State Parks Where Data Is Not Regularly Collected

REGION	STATE PARK	COMMENTS
1	FL - N. Shore unit	No data collection
2	Fish Creek	No data collection for 2020 or 2021
3	Beaverhead Rock	Will begin collecting data in Fall 2021
3	Granite Ghost Town	Began collecting data in June 2021
4	Elkhorn Ghost Town	No data collection
4	Marias River	No data collection
5	Yellowstone River	No data collection

REPORTING NOTES:

Visitation data is typically based on reported estimates from 45 of Montana's 55 state parks. In the winter, some parks and/or campground entrances are seasonally closed. While the system does experience some off-season camping, numbers are generally low.

Staff members are currently working with experts at the University of Montana's Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research (ITRR) to gain assistance with revising the system's visitation methodology. Additionally, park staff members are in the process of adding counting devices to entrances where either existing counters were nearing the end of their useful life, or there simply were not counters installed.

It should also be noted that occasionally staff might determine the need to make slight revisions to previous month totals to improve accuracy.

For questions about this report, contact Kyan Bishop, Parks and Outdoor Recreation Planner, at Kyan.Bishop@mt.gov or at (406) 444-3364.